DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 167 742 CE 019 517

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TITLE	Occupational Choice: Do Traditional and Non-Traditional Women Differ?
INSTITUTION	RJ Associates, Inc., Arlington, Va.
SPONS AGENCY	Women's Bureau (DOL), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Apr 78
NOTE	18p.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Area Vocational Schools; *Career Development; Counseling Effectiveness; Educational Opportunities; *Enrollment Influences; *Females; *High School Students; *Occupational Choice; Parent Influence; Secondary Education; Social Influences; Student Problems; Teacher Influence; *Vocational Education; Vocational Interests; Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS	Nontraditional Occupations; Nontraditional Roles

ABSTRACT

A national survey of women in nontraditional, mixed, and traditional occupational training at area vocational technical schools was conducted to determine the factors which influence women to enter nontraditional training and how they differ from those of traditional women. It was found that women have difficulty selecting a nontraditional vocational program and that this problem is compounded by the pressure on women to choose academic preparation. Interest was the single most powerful force influencing women in their selection of vocational training. Ability in the occupational area was second, and earnings came third. Career education, career orientation, and job site visitation were considered more useful counseling techniques than individual counseling, vocational testing, or group counseling. Educational personnel did not have a great impact on the career decision making of students. Counselors and teachers had more influence on traditional women than on nontraditional women. Parents were the most influential group for nontraditional students. Employment of women in related occupations simultaneous to their vocational training was an extremely important factor in improving their education and training. The largest single problem identified by women was the problem of men adjusting to women in their classroom, particularly if there were very few women in the classroom. (LMS)

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Occupational Choice: Do Traditional and Non-Traditional Women Differ?

by

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for

The Conference on Young Women and Employment

Women's Bureau/Office of Youth Programs

DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

April 1978

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Occupational Choice Among Women in Vocational Education

This paper is based on recent research conducted by Rj Associates. 1/ The focus of the research was to determine the factors which influence women to enter non-traditional training and how they differ from those of traditional women. Our findings are based on data from women in non-traditional, mixed and traditional occupational training at area vocational technical schools nationally. 2/

Vocational vs. Academic Preparation

Women have difficulty selecting a non-traditional vocational program in high school, but this only compounded by the difficulty women have in selecting non-academic education within the social context of the school. One cannot deal with women's choice between traditional and non-traditional education without considering the role of vocational education within the social system. Women vocational students are obviously being influenced by the value placed on an academic program in high school. Teachers and counselors often influence women toward academic goals, and parents who have themselves attended college are likely to exercise a major influence on women students encouraging them to academic pursuits. If a student accepts even a traditional secretarial program it is tantamount to admitting that she does not have "the capacity" to do academic work. Young women considering a move into non-traditional vocational areas are often faced with even greater negative pressure.

Approximately 30% of all high school vocational students in our sample indicated that they planned to attend a postsecondary academic program, while only 16% planned a postsecondary vocational technical program. An even larger percent of the women whose parents had had some college education were opting

1/ Rj Associates, Inc. "Women in Non-Traditional Training in Secondary Vocational Education" (April 1978) and "Factors Influencing the Participation of Women in Non-Traditional Occupations in Postsecondary Area Vocational Training Schools" (November 1976), and "Problems of Women in Apprenticeship." All data quoted refer to secondary schools unless otherwise noted.

2/ Non-traditional vocational training is defined as vocational programs in which 0-25.0% of the enrollees nationally are women. The training is considered "Mixed" if 25.1-75.0% of the enrollees nationally are women and "Traditional" if 75.1-100% of the enrollees nationally are women.

for an academic postsecondary program. Sixty percent of all high school vocational students (women whose mothers or father have had some college) planned to go to a two or four year academic program after high school. Women with academic plans were those most likely to be motivated on the basis of their ability, those who had exhibited the most interest in the vocational area which they had selected, and those who were most influenced by educational personnel (compared to persons with plans to work or plans to enter postsecondary vocational training).

Given their strong motivations of interest and ability in the occupational area selected it seems logical that these women either ought to be encouraged to enter a related postsecondary vocational program or they should have been in a related secondary school academic program in the first place.

All of this only reinforces a current issue being raised by the Department of Labor--young persons are being unnecessarily channelled into academic programs because of the belief that education is inherently good and is a ticket to success. In fact, this is now being challenged by the oversupply of persons with college degrees. Many women "flounder around" in various postsecondary academic programs trying to decide what they want to do and eventually enroll in a postsecondary vocational program. This is not to say that vocational education is a "better" answer, but that career decision-making needs to be made free from the idea that some occupations are more "appropriate." Students must be free to select from among all occupations, academic or vocational, rather than from among those that are considered "high status."

The data from our studies indicate that secondary school vocational women are not the only group subject to this flux and indecision who waiver between vocational and academic pursuits. In our postsecondary study, 37% of our non-traditional vocational sample were women who had been college preparatory students in high school; of the 19% of the postsecondary students who were in non-traditional vocational programs only 6% had been in non-traditional training in high school. And in our study of women in apprenticeship, 53% of the apprentices studied were also college preparatory students only 3% had been in vocational education. And yet, almost all complained of the difficulty their absence of technical school caused them. This suggests that the mismatch of

students between vocational and academic programs contributes to a substantial time waste for women. We question whether there is a similar mismatch for men. Much of this could be avoided if women students had the opportunity for broader exposure to occupations at the high school level so that their occupational decisions would have more relevancy to their future careers.

In our two studies, this problem of mismatch seems to be a greater problem to non-traditional women students than traditional students. The nature of adolescence has had a major impact on the shifts observed in mixed and non-traditional women. The issue may be that women change their main interest several times between 16 and 35. Yet, women in traditional occupations are apparently much more secure in their selection of training for an occupation, perhaps because in conforming to the stereotypes they perceive fewer alternatives to consider. Nonetheless, any serious consideration of the problems faced by women in entering training for non-traditional employment, must include the school, their parents, as well as their own perceptions which apparently continue to press them both to academic pursuits as well as to traditional vocational training.

Demographic Background to Career Choice

There is much variation in the response to issues from subgroups in our samples. Responses of non-traditional, mixed and traditional women differ. Responses of White and Black, metro and non-metro, high and low income women; women with plans to work after high school, and women with plans to attend post-secondary vocational schools,--all vary significantly from the universe of women studied.

Further, their differences are apparently individual response differences not socio-demographic differences. Although non-traditional, mixed, and traditional women respond differently to motivation, school personnel, influence, counseling programs, etc., it is not because they are from different backgrounds. In the case of professionals it has been noted that women entering non-traditional professions are more likely to be from high income, professional families, both of whose parents work. 1/ This is not true of the women in

1/ Astin, Helen, The Woman Doctorate in America (1969, Russell Sage Foundation).

vocational education. There are only two characteristics which are different among the women in our sample: non-traditional and mixed women tend to have a higher percentage of minority group members at the secondary school level, and women from metro 1/ areas are more likely to enroll in non-traditional programs. However, these factors do not account for the differences. Household income or race has an impact on the strength of the response to an issue, but for non-traditional or traditional women these characteristics impact the response in the same direction and often with similar strength. Non-traditional and traditional Whites differ, non-traditional and traditional Blacks differ, non-traditional and traditional metro women differ, and non-traditional and traditional non-metro women differ. Women share an interest in a particular set of occupations or are motivated by particular forces or have different responses to their parents, peers, and schools. It is the difference in these factors which make their responses different, not their socio-demographic background.

Motivating Factors

a. Interest

Interest is the single most powerful motivating force influencing women in their selection of vocational training; it is also the factor which was most closely related to "successful" vocational choice. Three-quarters of the traditional and non-traditional women and two-thirds of the mixed women indicated that it was very important to their selection of training. Among the women who plan to work, the group with high interest motivation were those who plan to work in the area in which they are training; this is particularly true of White women and women from higher income households.

b. Ability

Ability in the occupational area is the second strongest motivational factor for students' selection of vocational training. Half of all non-traditional and mixed women are motivated by ability, and an even larger percentage (60%) of traditional women were so motivated. The group most often influenced by ability are traditional women planning to pursue an academic career.

1/ Those who live in Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (whether suburban or central city).

Non-traditional women consider ability in their area less important to their selection of training than traditional women. When non-traditional women feel that ability is much less important than interest, it can be interpreted to mean that they question their own ability, and therefore, decide that ability is not that important. If this is true, the non-traditional women will need considerable support to prevent problems in their training from reinforcing their lack of confidence in their ability to perform non-traditional tasks. Absent this, women are likely to reject their non-traditional careers and will seek a more supported role like those in the traditional occupations.

The relatively low response (45%) of non-traditional Black women on ability as a motivating factor may be a very strong lack of security as to their own ability. If this is the case, there is a very special need for reinforcement of Black women on the issue of ability as well as improving their skills acquisition so they can increase their reliance on their own ability. There is a marked shift of the Blacks away from work and postsecondary vocational programs on completion of high school with 44% 1/ of these vocational students planning to enter a postsecondary academic program. This prevails across non-traditional, mixed and traditional classifications. This shift of the Black women is not related to their socio-economic characteristics, i,e., low income or mother's or father's education which influence White students' decisions to enter postsecondary academic programs. Rather, it is probably due to their low self-esteem related to their perception of their ability to perform vocational tasks.

c. Earnings

Earnings have been considered a critical factor in motivating women to enter non-traditional occupations. This commonly held assumption was also expressed by educational personnel who considered earnings a major factor influencing the decisions of non-traditional students. Student responses, however, showed that earnings was not as important a factor for non-traditional women as it was for traditional and particularly for mixed women. However, low income and particularly Black women across the board considered earnings a more important factor in their choice of occupational training programs than did more affluent or White women.

1/ Compared to 30% for other groups.

The issue of motivation is very complex. Secondary school women do not obtain adequate information, nor are most of them being exposed to enough areas to stimulate their interest early enough so that they may then test out and discover whether they have any ability in the areas in which they have an interest. Interest must be stimulated much earlier in the school career prior to high school. With sufficient knowledge, women would start being able to follow through rationally on their decisions.

If more women are to be encouraged to enter non-traditional vocational training something more than higher earnings will have to be offered. Although there are persons who are attracted by the earnings of non-traditional occupations; other women who are equally attracted by earnings choose traditional occupations. In a recent study of the occupational knowledge of adult women, the authors pointed out that when asked which occupation earns the most income women very often chose the traditional female occupations. 1/ If a student's mother has been employed in part-time jobs in the secondary labor market, that young woman may consider a full-time permanent job as a secretary to be very well-paid, indeed. It would appear that these women are bound by their stereotypes and are, therefore, choosing the occupation with the highest earnings of the adult women they know. Students apparently still make their occupational choices largely among those occupations in which persons they know are presently employed. Women must receive accurate occupational information in order to choose rationally among their career opportunities rather than narrowly from among their familiar stereotypes.

Counseling Techniques

The purpose of counseling programs in the educational institutions is to assist students in this process of career choice. According to our research data, however, the techniques which receive the most emphasis and widespread use in the schools are those which the students find least satisfactory.

1/ Education Commission of the States, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Adult Work Skills and Knowledge, September 1976.

Findings from our study indicate:

- There was considerable agreement among women in non-traditional mixed, and traditional vocational training as to which counseling techniques are useful and which are not useful to students in their career decision-making;

- Career education, career orientation, and job site visitation were the counseling techniques that were positively received by all three groups;

- The response of those who actually participated in these programs was even more positive. Sixty-five percent of all non-traditional women who participated in career education indicated that it was very influential on their career decision-making;

- Less than 27% of the participants considered individual counseling, vocational testing, or group counseling of value in their career decision-making. Although individual counseling followed by vocational testing were available to most women, and three-quarters of the women participated in individual counseling and half in vocational testing, these techniques were only about half as influential as career education, career orientation or job site visits;

- Although no group held vocational testing in high regard, women's responses indicate that it was more influential on traditional than on non-traditional women, which seems to confirm that women students reject vocational testing because of its sex bias;

- Group counseling was not viewed by students as favorably as other evaluations of its utility;

- Educational personnel did not consider any counseling techniques NOT USEFUL; and all of them considered individual counseling the most useful. On the other hand, from 25% to more than 75% of non-traditional vocational students found each system NOT USEFUL;

- Both educational personnel and students considered job site visitation very useful. Considering the high student estimation of value and the inexpensiveness of the technique once it is organized, an expansion of its availability beyond its presence in only 32% of the schools seems warranted;

- Educational personnel indicated that their school systems did not use prepackaged materials, although half were in favor of in-service training. The counselors recommended training for teachers, and teachers felt it would be particularly valuable for the counselors, but both felt their schools would not accept such training.

Considering the absence of support for individual counseling as expressed by the students, the positive response of all women students, particularly non-traditional women, to career education (as well as to career orientation and job site visitations) is an important finding. Career education, career orientation, and job site visitations each offer a real involvement of the student in the decision-making. Each provides the student with information or actual experiences requiring that she draw her own conclusions. Women vocational students were apparently less likely to be influenced by ideas imposed on them by others.

If we compare the top four methods (those receiving support from the largest percentage of women) against the other four methods, we find:

#1	#2
Career Education	Individual Counseling
Career Orientation	Vocational Testing
Job Site Visitation	Group Counseling, Men and Women
Industry Representative Visit	Group Counseling, Women Only

Group #1 appears to be programs which offer information about careers, and in the case of career education and job site visits offer a certain amount of "real experience," whereas group #2 seems to be emphasize discussion about what they would like to do, or being tested or counseled to identify their interests or aptitudes, and from these results be matched with an occupational category. The results of the latter group of programs rely much more heavily on the counselors' skills as well as their preconceptions about sex roles than does the first group. The first group relies more on the student's reaction to direct or indirect experience about tasks, work environments, education and skill requirements, etc. Students reject the use of individual counseling, group counseling, or vocational testing to provide them with answers.

These findings have serious programmatic implications. The allocation of guidance funds and personnel time emphasizing individual counseling and vocational testing is not only a fiscal waste but an unrecoverable waste of individuals time and talent if these techniques are not helping them make appropriate career decisions. It increases the number of women and presumably men who must return

to school later in their adult life when they finally make a satisfactory career decision. It reduces even further the schools' ability to assist students in a smooth transition to work.

Providing Alternative Choice

It is easy to say that what needs to be done is to stimulate interest, provide opportunities for trying out ability, and provide sufficient information so students can match their knowledge of themselves with the variety of occupations for which they can prepare themselves. However, it is not as easy to carry it out as it would appear, because of strong stereotypes and a variety of societal expectations which face women in their consideration of alternative occupations. Although a similar percentage of non-traditional women seriously considered mixed, traditional and other non-traditional occupations as alternatives, few mixed and fewer traditional students considered non-traditional occupations as alternatives.

And although in total (17%) of all women considered non-traditional occupations as an alternative, only 5% of all women vocational students have entered non-traditional training. Further, of those who have participated in non-traditional training only 40% have firm plans to eventually work in the occupation for which they are training.

There are two primary issues to be considered in alternative occupations--exposure and support. If women only consider traditional occupations they will not select any occupations save those that are traditional. Once women students have the opportunity to seriously consider alternatives they must receive all support that can be mustered from parents, peers, and the media as well from parents, peers, and the media as well from educational personnel to make whatever their choices are plausible, and not socially unacceptable. Wherever possible, they should be exposed to a reality orientation. Apparently, from the point of view of the students themselves the most appropriate solution that would be easy to mount would be a variety of job site visitations.

Influentials

Educational personnel have a great opportunity to impact the career decision-making of students, yet data indicate that they are not. Although women in tradi-

tional training were more influenced by educational personnel, 50% indicated that neither a high school teacher nor counselor was influential in their selection of training.

Both counselors and teachers had more influence on traditional women than on non-traditional women. For mixed women, counselors are as influential as they are for traditional women. The influence of teachers on mixed women is comparatively reduced as it is for non-traditional women. Men educational personnel are more influential on non-traditional women; and women educational personnel on traditional women. Mixed women are influenced by men and women about equally.

The issue of influence of male teachers versus female teachers is predominantly a result of the sex of the vocational education teachers. In all cases, influential teachers other than vocational education teachers are equally divided between men and women. Since more men teach non-traditional vocational courses, and more women teach traditional vocational courses, this accounts for non-traditional women selecting men teachers, traditional women selecting women teachers, and mixed women selecting men and women teachers about equally.

Parents are the most influential group on non-traditional students, but, by and large, unless they have specific relevant information, the parents' role is likely to be that of supporting and encouraging students rather than assisting them in their career decision-making. What is more, parents who attended college are likely to influence their daughters in vocational training to revert to academic areas.

Parents' lack of a broad base of occupational information may limit their ability to advise their daughters constructively. Programs designed to assist women in occupational decision-making should include parental involvement since they have the potential to have a significant positive influence on non-traditional students' decision-making.

It would appear that if parents are to be able to influence their daughters who are interested in non-traditional occupations, this influence should be brought to bear when the women are as young as possible. Early increase of occupational information available to parents is likely to be beneficial to students' decision-making.

The breadth of the educational personnel that can potentially influence a woman in her career decision-making requires that all educational personnel be able to assist her as her need crosses their opportunity to help her.

All educational personnel may need some support and some training in order to be able to carry through their support of those that seek their assistance. This includes junior and senior high school teachers, academic as well as vocational, men and women, counselors and teachers. The network of support must include all educational personnel and must be able to reach out beyond the school and train parents so that they too will be able to provide informed support.

Employment in Related Occupations

Employment of women in related occupations simultaneous to their vocational training can be an extremely important factor in improving their education and training. Further, related employment, probably because it reassures the women of their ability to do a job, is related to a "successful" career decision. More women who had worked in a related job during high school were planning to go to work in a related job after high school. Such experiences are useful in improving their skills, easing their tansition from school to work, and for non-traditional women, increasing their confidence in their ability to perform "a man's job, in a man's world." For these reasons, job development for placement in training-related areas is an important service that some schools provide. Unfortunately, it has benefitted proportionately more traditional than non-traditional women.

More schools should undertake these programs either independently or in coordination with a placement office. When such a program is undertaken, equal

emphasis should be given to the development of jobs for women in non-traditional and traditional training. Of the women planning to work after high school a very low percentage of non-traditional (52%) and mixed women (32%) plan to work in their respective occupations after graduation compared to the 80% of traditional women who plan to work in traditional occupations. In addition to the fact that they have had little related work in high school, this may be in part due to the fact that women in non-traditional training expect to have difficulty in finding jobs in the area in which they are training and are, therefore, discouraged from trying. It may also be due to the complex of difficulties they have experienced in the classroom.

Problems and Diffuclties in the Classroom

- Sixty-five percent of all non-traditional women had problems in their classes, and of those, 58% had two or more problems;
- Individual problems that cause difficulty to non-traditional women were more likely to be related to the men in their class than to their teachers. Those causing difficulty most often were:
  - men had difficulty adjusting to women;
  - men are better prepared, and
  - teachers expect more of women.
- The number of women in the class is a critical factor affecting the number of problems young women experience. Women in classes with three or fewer women classmates have more problems, and more such women have multiple problems. More women in classes with six or more women classmates have no problems, and fewer have multiple problems;
- Black women and low income women have more problems than other women.

The largest single problem identified by women is the problem of men adjusting to women in their classroom particularly where there are very few women in the classroom. Responsibility for maintaining a positive working atmosphere in the classroom rests with the teacher and teachers clearly have neither been able to control the harassment in the classroom, or have not invested enough effort in its control. This problem is reported by the women in high school classes,

postsecondary schools, on job sites, and by apprentices. It is unlikely that men students will learn to adjust to women students until the teachers insist on an end to it.

One of the things that must be done is that there can be no overt or covert acceptance of the harassment on the part of the teachers. In addition to firmness on the part of the teacher there are other approaches that can be tried. The administration can monitor classes that are known to be having difficulty. This would impress upon the teachers that acceptance of such activities will not be tolerated. The provision of training to the teachers might help the situation. In the use of the buddy system men and women students can be assigned to work together so that the men's learning will depend on the woman's learning.

The storekeeper of a vocational class could be an excellent job for women, particularly a community person from the neighborhood. If the person has a given amount of stature in the community it may serve to slow down a group of hot-headed young men.

Placing women students in related training positions can also be helpful. If women have the opportunity to work with adult males, they may learn to handle young men. Another possibility is using a team teaching approach utilizing a woman teacher initially to teach the cognitive skills.

Solving the problem of harassment will require the investment of effort, thought and creative solutions to the problem. The problem seems to be surfacing everywhere and will require a body of knowledge to combat it. All successful approaches should be disseminated so that teachers and work supervisors can be informed about how they can best deal with the problem.

Educational personnel have stated that they do not know how to reduce the harassment. 1/ Educational personnel agree that they need more in-service training to enable them to understand how to increase educational equity. The handling of harassment is one of the issues which could be included in in-service

1/ Responses of educational personnel in our study who were named by non-traditional students as being very influential on their selection of training.

training for teachers. There is evidence that circulation of pre-packaged materials, although presumably a simpler method of addressing the problem, is not likely 1/ to accomplish the purpose.

Post High School Experiences

Each step of the way along the path to a firm career decision, the student seeking to match her interest and ability with a commensurate job is met with stumbling blocks; more so, if her interests are not in an academic pursuit, and particularly if they are not in traditional occupations. Women pursuing traditional careers may have an easier time initially because the system presently supports them, but many, later in their lives, return to school or seek out other training to change careers which were not sufficiently well matched with their interest and motivation while they were in high school.

High school career decision-making has impact on women who go to work on completion of high school; those who attend a postsecondary vocational training program; those who attend an academic college program; those who work and "re-enter" postsecondary vocational technical training to attain new or expanded skills; those who enter apprenticeship, and for those who choose to work before and/or after their homemaker careers.

Boys know from the time that they are children that when they grow up they will work. This is internalized very early, and all experiences are tested against this goal. Many women may, as children never have considered work as anything other than a "filler" for the time between their leaving high school (or college) until they marry, have children, and settle down to their life career as wife and mother. Even if they recognize that they may have to work at certain times, they perceive that work is incidental, designed only to supplement family income. School experiences, therefore, were sieved through their perception of what was useful to their role as homemaker not against their eventual careers.

1/ Responses from educational personnel in our study of secondary vocational education.

Mores and perceptions change slowly and although more and more younger women have begun to understand that work is likely to play much more than a peripheral role in their lives, the balance between home and work in the life of women is an evolving concept.

At present, women are 43% of all vocational education students; and of that group, 35% are registered in homemaking courses that are not work-related. 1/ If the decision-making factors in high school that we have described are to have their full impact, all women, must first start to take their work role as seriously as do men. They must recognize that 48% of all women are presently working, that over 90% of all women work some time during their life, and that these facts affect their life. 2/ Forty-two percent of the work force is now women and it can be expected during the working life of students now in high school that women will become 50% of all workers. 3/ Thus, the importance of career decisions for women already must be examined in a different context.

Women can and must be prepared for the eventuality of work. This not only will make them more productive and provide them with more benefits from their work (satisfaction, higher monetary return) but will also reduce the waste of time and energy it takes for a woman to begin this preparation after high school, often when she already has family and job responsibilities. Sixty-three percent of all jobs require skills which can be acquired through vocational preparation at

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1/ Bureau of Occupational and Adult Education. Students Enrolled in Vocational Education, 1976 (unpublished data).

2/ Suter, Larry E., "Occupational Employment, and Lifetime Work Experience of Women," U.S. Bureau of Census.

3/ The labor force participation rate for men is dropping. Due to later entry into labor force and earlier and increased retirement for men, women are more quickly becoming a larger percentage of the work force!

the secondary or postsecondary level. Women could at least begin preparation while they are in high school.

Women must recognize that a job can be more than part-time, low paid, low status and with little likelihood for advancement. It is necessary for all young women to understand that work is not simply a filler or an inconsequential side issue of their life. If girls and young women realize this it is possible that the career decision-making of young women will take on increased importance.

As we have suggested, change comes slowly. It is possible that women may become half the labor force before young women will have internalized the reality of work in their lives.